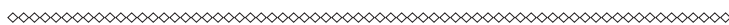


SECȚIUNEA I. ȘTIINȚE PENALE  
SECTION I. CRIMINAL SCIENCES



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METHODOLOGICAL PARTICULARITIES REGARDING THE INVESTIGATION  
OF CRIMES IN THE FIELD OF ILLEGAL TRAFFICKING  
OF DRUGS AND SYNTHETIC DRUGS

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*Summary*

*This article refers to the investigation of crimes related to the circulation of prohibited drugs on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. The content of the article discusses the methods adopted by criminals in order to hide the processes of committing crimes related to drug trafficking, through the latest online stores, messaging applications of mobile phones, about the division of roles of participants in the commission of crimes in the field of drug trafficking, the way to interaction between them. It also points to the causes that keep these crimes latent and provides recommendations to law enforcement bodies regarding some methodological aspects related to the investigation of these types of crimes.*

*Keywords: drugs, ethnobotanicals, trafficking, illegal circulation, investigation, drug user, illicit distribution, production, manufacture of drugs, transportation of drugs, possession of drugs, apprehension of the offender.*

**Introduction.** Drug-related crime, through its social, economic, medical, cultural, and political consequences, causes considerable harm not only to state interests but also to those of society, many individuals, jeopardizing the lives and health of citizens, and exerting a demoralizing influence on people’s consciousness and behavior. Drug consumption and trafficking in the Republic of Moldova are taking on new forms of manifestation, adopted from other states or newly created, due to several factors, including: the free movement of people across the country’s borders, the development of new information and communication technologies, and the continuous development of transnational organized crime. In light of these findings, more complex and varied approaches are needed from all actors involved in the fight against the drug phenomenon [6]. In this regard, the absolute necessity for new methodological studies and recommendations on the

forensic aspects of drug crime investigation by law enforcement agencies becomes inevitable.

**Methodology.** In the process of elaborating the article, the author was guided by a system of scientific research methods, namely: the systemic method, the method of deduction and induction, the method of analysis, the comparative method, statistical analysis, etc. Based on the analysis of relevant materials (national legislation, specialized literature, judicial practice), appropriate conclusions and recommendations are formulated.

**Results obtained and discussions.** According to the statistical information from the “Statistical Database of Moldova,” in 2022, in the territory of the Republic of Moldova (excluding the Transnistrian region and the municipality of Bender), 925 drug-related crimes were recorded<sup>1</sup> [2], in 2021 - 818, in 2020 - 995, in 2019 - 1052, in 2015 - 1200. Reported per 1,000,000 inhabitants in 2015, there were 42 drug-related crimes, in 2019 - 40, in 2020 - 34, in 2022 - 31.

The analysis conducted allowed for the profiling of the offender and highlighted the fact that, to a large extent, drug-related crimes in the Republic of Moldova are committed by individuals aged between 18 and 24 years old and over 30 years old, mostly males, often by individuals with no prior offenses, not employed/not in education (not active in social life), but also by those with criminal records. Regarding the age criterion, it is necessary to specify that in the age group of 18-24 years old, there is a growing trend, with a higher number of individuals being investigated for committing such crimes [6].

According to the statistical data from the Public Health Institution “Republican Narcology Dispensary,” the number of drug users recorded in the years 2011-2015 gradually increased, and in the period 2016-2018, it decreased as follows: in 2011 - 968 individuals recorded, in 2012 - 848 individuals, in 2013 - 744 individuals, in 2014 - 1049 individuals, in 2015 - 1117 individuals, in 2016 - 603 individuals, in 2017 - 890 individuals, and in 2018 - 668 individuals (statistical data from recent years were not provided). If we compare the number of drug trafficking-related offenses recorded and the number of individuals recorded by the Republican Narcology Dispensary as drug users, we observe an approximate coincidence between them. The conclusion in this case becomes clear: the majority of criminal cases initiated are related to the possession of drugs prohibited by law by users, and fewer cases involve proving the intent of production, sale, distribution, etc.

In recent times, drug prices have experienced significant variations. Wholesale prices have remained stable for cannabis, cocaine, amphetamine, and ecstasy pills, while the price of heroin has decreased by approximately 20% due to the emergence of alternatives, new types of drugs that are three or even four times cheaper than heroin. In 2020, nearly 7 tons of new psychoactive substances were seized in the European Union. These substances are sold for their psychoactive properties but are not controlled under international drug conventions. The European market for new psychoactive substances has been affected by recent restrictions on their production and export imposed by China, one of the main source countries [14].

The national anti-drug strategy for the years 2020-2027 of the Republic of Moldova aims to reduce drug demand (primary prevention of drug use, treatment, rehabilitation, and social reintegration of drug users), reduce drug supply (exercise control over the legal circulation of drugs and combat illicit drug trafficking and distribution, reduce drug accessibility, especially for minors, through the appropriate use of legal and institutional tools, counteract drug transit and introduction into the territory of the Republic of Moldova through smuggling, including through the services provided by the State Enterprise “Moldovan Post”, reduce the number of crimes committed by focusing on identifying and dismantling criminal groups involved in illicit drug trafficking, etc.) [6].

<sup>1</sup> The circulation of drugs, precursors, ethnobotanicals, and their analogues refers to any operations such as experimenting, developing, producing (manufacturing), preparing, cultivating, extracting, processing, transforming, possessing, storing, keeping, delivering, releasing, distributing, dispatching, transporting, procuring (buying), trading, destroying, importing, exporting, using, promoting them, and other related activities.

Responsible for achieving the most important objectives are the law enforcement agencies within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Customs Service, the Information and Security Service, etc. Within the drug policy, the Ministry of Internal Affairs is predominantly responsible for implementing the Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, adopted in Vienna on December 20, 1988 [3], especially regarding taking measures to combat the supply of illicit drugs and the cultivation of plants for drug production. In general, the Ministry of Internal Affairs is responsible for maintaining public order and security, combating drug-related crimes, and providing professional training to its personnel. It plays an important role in controlling and enforcing the law regarding the legal circulation of drugs, narcotic substances, psychotropic substances, and precursors, and ensures countering, detecting, and investigating, within its competencies, the illegal trafficking across the state border of drugs, narcotic substances, psychotropic substances, and precursors, and in the absence of customs authorities, carries out their seizure.

In cases of drug trafficking-related crimes, the modus operandi by which the acts were committed is one of the key elements in the forensic characterization of these offenses. It is also a necessary element of the objective side of the offense provided by criminal law. Therefore, we can conclude that the methods of committing criminal acts in this category of cases represent a system of techniques used by subjects to achieve their criminal goals: the method of committing the act reflects its material manifestation.

The methods of committing drug trafficking-related crimes are reflected in objective reality in the form of a specific system of traces. These traces provide an opportunity to perceive the essence of the event (preparation for the commission of the offense, the immediate event of committing the crime, the subsequent behavior of the offender), as well as the specific circumstances of the offense related to the person or the circle of persons who may commit the offense. Establishing the method of committing the offense allows for determining the most optimal methodology for discovering and investigating the crime.

Most methods of committing drug-related crimes ultimately aim to achieve maximum profit and subsequent legalization of the proceeds from criminal activities. The money obtained from drug sales re-enters illegal circulation to procure new batches of drugs and resell them. Furthermore, the financial resources obtained through criminal means or criminal activities are often used not only to commit new drug-related crimes but also to fund various legal activities carried out as a cover. Practice shows that these funds are used to acquire commercial enterprises (markets, stores, online store networks) or small businesses (laundromats, auto repair shops, agricultural or recreational land, etc.). Additionally, drug money is often used to purchase weapons, finance political leaders, corrupt officials of various ranks, support (illegal) gambling units, bars, and nightclubs. Drug traffickers often invest money in movable and immovable properties. Thus, there is a “money laundering” of the proceeds from drug trafficking.

Among drug-related crimes, the most stable and significant proportion is represented by “Illegal circulation of drugs, herbal substances, or their analogues without the purpose of alienation,” and usually, the objective aspect is manifested by the illegal procurement<sup>2</sup> and storage

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Explanatory Decision of the Plenum of the Supreme Court of Justice of the Republic of Moldova, 11) the procurement of drugs, herbal substances, or their analogues is considered obtaining them by a person through an illicit transaction (purchase, receipt as a loan, as a gift, or in exchange for other goods and objects, as well as as a means of reciprocal settlement for work done, a service provided, or as repayment of a debt, etc.), as a result of which they become the possessor of these substances; 12) the possession of drugs, herbal substances, or their analogues means any deliberate action related to the illicit acquisition of these substances by the guilty party (keeping them on oneself, in rooms, in specially adapted places, in hiding places, in means of transport intended for temporary storage, etc.). At the same time, it does not matter how long the person illegally keeps these substances, as the offense has a continuous character. The possession of the respective substances is a natural continuation of their procurement or preparation (sometimes also of their transportation, dispatch, etc.); 13) the transportation of drugs, herbal substances, or their

without the intention of selling [7]. The state and dynamics of this crime primarily characterize the criminality associated with the illegal circulation of drugs, from a statistical perspective of the number of offenses committed.

Usually, such crimes are committed following a similar scenario. Drug users through the “Internet” search for drug dealers and distributors, then contact them through instant messaging programs (Viber, WhatsApp, Messenger, Telegram, Skype, etc.) and receive details regarding the payment method for the drugs they have chosen. After paying for the goods, the consumer receives a message in the messaging application indicating the address and detailed location of the hiding place, with detailed instructions for finding the narcotics or psychotropic substance purchased. Often, the message also contains a photograph of the location (marking). The user then keeps the drug with them for a period of time or hides it to transfer or transport it in a certain way, if necessary, to the place where it should be consumed.

In most cases, the consumer is apprehended and, most often, convicted for “Illegal Circulation of Drugs, Herbal Substances, or their Analogues without the Purpose of Alienation” (paragraph 2 of Article 217 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Moldova). Traders, on the other hand, are often referred to in legal proceedings as “unidentified persons,” and therefore, usually, it is not possible to establish their identity.

Procuring narcotics and/or herbal substances for personal consumption is always associated with their illegal possession. Possession of drugs/herbal substances is defined by the legislator as any intentional actions related to the actual possession of them by the perpetrator (on their person, in transit, inside the home, in improvised hiding places in any public or private places, and in other locations). The methods of storage vary depending on the operations the subject intends to carry out with the drugs/herbal substances they possess.

Regular users typically keep drugs on their person - in clothing pockets, bags, etc. Small-scale dealers (direct distributors to consumers), usually divide the drugs they have purchased into two parts, keeping a small portion with them and the main part in an apartment or in places where the drug can be quickly accessed (mailboxes at the entrances of residential buildings, easily accessible hiding spots).

Major drug dealers do not keep drugs/herbal substances, etc. on their person, but they can often be found during searches in hiding places set up in apartments, houses, basements, and garages. Criminals show great ingenuity when setting up special hiding spots. In apartments, drugs can be stored in specially designed hiding places, which are equipped in window sills, floors, walls, and pieces of furniture. Drugs are hidden in curtain rods, in the folds of curtains, in niches and toilet flush tanks, in electrical meters, in containers with cereals, sugar, or liquids, in books. Cribs and toys, as well as children’s clothing, are often used to conceal drugs. In larger houses, drugs are hidden in attics and basements, buried in adjacent areas, in trash, as in this case it is quite difficult to prove that the drugs found belong to the people living in these houses. Additionally, drugs are often handed over for storage to relatives or acquaintances of the traffickers. This must be taken into account in the process of investigating crimes related to the illegal trafficking of drugs. It should be noted that the storage method largely depends on the condition of the drug/herbal substances, the convenience of transportation, and the ability, in some cases, to mask the specific odor.

If the drug is a solution (acetylated opium, poppy straw infusion, ephedrine), then it is usually stored in a glass container with a tight-fitting lid or stopper. The drug solution can also be kept in syringes (some distributors of injectable drugs distribute drugs already prepared for injection

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analogues involves moving them from one place to another, including within the limits of the same locality, using any type of transport or object used as a means of transport, regardless of the location where the substances are stored, within the customs territory of the Republic of Moldova.

to assure the consumer that they will not be detained for storing and transporting the drug, as it is “consumed” immediately).

Drugs in powder form (heroin, amphetamines) are typically stored in paper bags of various types (such as tracing paper, notebook or magazine sheets), in small plastic bags. Their size is determined by the criminal, depending on the volume of drugs packaged in them and the transportation specifics. Drugs in tablet form (methadone, promedol, phencyclidine) are stored both in packaging (glass, plastic containers, plastic bags) and without them. Drugs in mass or pasty form (hashish oil, raw opium) are stored in polyethylene bags or small glass containers, sometimes in matchboxes.

Drugs in vegetable form (marijuana, poppy straw), depending on the quantity, can be stored in polyethylene or cloth bags, shopping bags, backpacks. The manufacturing of drugs is understood as intentional, illegal actions aimed at obtaining from narcotic plants, substances containing drugs, chemicals, and other substances one or more narcotics ready for use and consumption, among those included in the List [5] of narcotic, psychotropic substances, and plants containing such substances. The production of narcotics, meaning actions aimed at their mass production, is also classified as an illicit act. Most often, for these purposes, natural material in the form of raw materials from wild hemp, poppy intended for opium extraction, is used. Synthetic drugs are also manufactured. Furthermore, by “production,” it is understood not only the final result, when the drug is obtained and ready for use, but the production process itself [7].

The method of manufacturing drugs varies depending on the raw materials used to produce them, as well as what kind of drugs the offender is trying to obtain. According to the Decision of the Plenum of the Supreme Court of Justice of the Republic of Moldova regarding the judicial practice of applying criminal legislation regulating the circulation of drugs, ethnobotanicals, or their analogues and precursors, processing drugs, ethnobotanicals, or their analogues means changing their initial consumption qualities in order to enhance or modify in another way the specific effects they produce (for example, refining (separating impurities) the mixture containing one or more drugs, ethnobotanicals, or their analogues, increasing the concentration of the drug or ethnobotanical in the preparation, mixing with other pharmacologically active substances to enhance the narcotic effect on the body, etc.) [7].

Based on this definition, three types of processing can be distinguished in practice: refining (cleaning of impurities), increasing the concentration of the drug, obtaining a substance based on a drug that is not narcotic. This latter method of processing does not constitute an offense under Article 217 of the Criminal Code.

Practice shows that a small number of cases are initiated for the manufacture and processing of narcotics. This can be explained by the fact that currently the drug distribution network has been improved so much that it is not difficult at all to procure them. The places and methods of distribution are usually well known to drug addicts. And considering that the punishment for manufacturing and processing is greater than for possession and transportation without the purpose of trafficking, it is quite evident that for a drug addict it is easier to acquire a drug than to prepare it.

Transporting drugs, ethnobotanicals, or their analogues involves moving them from one place to another, including within the limits of the same locality, using any type of transportation or object used as a means of transport, regardless of the location where the substances are stored, within the customs territory of the Republic of Moldova. The Plenum clarifies that any mode of transport includes land, underground, water, or air, while the method of transport and the location of storage of illegally moved funds do not matter [7]. The methods of transporting and concealing drugs during transportation are quite diverse. Drug transportation can also be in the form of parcels (letters), luggage, through couriers, or in other ways (for example, using animals: dogs or birds). It is not mandatory for the sender to accompany the parcel (luggage). Typically, during transportation, drugs are

disguised among other items. Illicit drug trafficking should be understood as any means of paid or free transfer of drugs to other persons (sale, donation, exchange, payment of a debt, loan, etc.), as well as other distribution methods, for example, through injection.

To date, the most common method of drug distribution (in the vast majority of criminal cases studied) is non-contact selling, using concealments in which the substances are placed<sup>3</sup> [11].

Initially, major drug traffickers reach agreements with distributors (“couriers”, “carriers”[4]). These distributors, in turn, leave a sum of money as collateral through electronic payment methods and provide personal data. Subsequently, drug dealers systematically begin to transfer drugs to the “couriers”, also using a contactless method - hiding spots. Initially, drugs are administered in small quantities, but as the “courier” gains trust and builds a reputation, larger quantities are transferred to them. The couriers of purchased narcotics package the drugs in smaller quantities, usually indicated by the drug dealer, and then find places and create hiding spots with drugs in those areas of the city indicated by the drug dealer or decide themselves if allowed by the dealer. As the “hiding spots” are paid for and found by the end user, the “courier” (sometimes also called a mortgagee) receives their reward in money, likewise through electronic payment systems. It should also be noted that the “participants” do not communicate directly with the organizer; they communicate through curators (“operators”)<sup>4</sup> [12].

Each objective method of committing a crime causes specific changes only to them, in the

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<sup>3</sup> The defendant C. Marius, being questioned under oath, fully admitted his guilt in committing the offense attributed to him, stating that between November 2022 and December 2022, he sold drugs - Amphetamine and Mephedrone - through the Telegram application. He obtained the drugs in the following manner: he would send a message through the Telegram application to the store that dealt with drug sales, after which he would receive the coordinates for picking up the package and the weight of the package in the same way. After receiving the package, he would divide it into smaller packages, place them in hiding spots of his choice, and send the coordinates to the individuals in the store. He regrets his actions. At the time of his apprehension, he voluntarily handed over several drug packages prepared to be placed in hiding spots, despite having the real possibility of disposing of them and not handing them over to the police collaborators. As a result of his activities, he received a profit transferred from the store’s account in cryptocurrency. He was paid several times, \$200 each time. The necessity of his activities stemmed from the goal of making money. He is not a drug user, just an occasional experimenter.

<sup>4</sup> The defendant B.A. has been accused that during the period of the year 2021, until the moment of detention on 30.09.2021, together and by prior agreement with other unidentified individuals by the criminal prosecution body, aiming to profit from the illegal circulation of drugs, acting through participation in the form of an organized criminal group, with the preventive distribution of roles to each, as the perpetrator undertook actions for the procurement, storage, transportation, distribution, or other illegal operations with drugs, as well as the alienation of drugs. Thus, during the mentioned period, to achieve the common criminal purpose, according to the prior agreement and according to the role assigned to him in advance, B.A., coordinating his actions through communication applications on the Internet network with other co-participants in the commission of the crime, acted as a courier within an online drug distribution store created in the Telegram communication application. In the criminal group to which B.A. belonged, and was assigned the role of courier, distributing repackaged drugs in zip-lock packages in the municipality of Chisinau to individuals who purchased them, there were also other unidentified individuals who managed and ensured the operation of the online drug store, individuals who acted as operators of the online store, responsible for receiving orders for the procurement of drugs, keeping records of the quantities of drugs placed to be taken by recipients, and transmitting the respective information among other group members, as well as individuals responsible for receiving larger quantities of drugs, repackaging them in smaller quantities, and passing them on to couriers for further distribution. The criminal activity of the organized criminal group to which B.A. belonged was carried out through the online drug sales store and had a continuous nature, with a stable and well-defined distribution of roles for each member, and communication between group members was exclusively done through internet communication applications. B.A. used his mobile phone of model \*\*\*\*\*, with IMEI numbers: \*\*\*\*\*, as well as the mobile phone of model \*\*\*\*\*, with IMEI numbers: \*\*\*\*\* and \*\*\*\*\*, from which he sent and received messages, including through the account “\*\*\*\*\*” (registered on the phone number +373 \*\*\*\*\*), created in the Telegram application installed on it. In this regard, at the direction of individuals managing the online drug sales store, B.A. received information about the exact location and coordinates from where he picked up packages with multiple smaller packages of marijuana drugs, which he transported and stored at a temporary residence he rented for this purpose, located in Chisinau, \*\*\*\*\*. Furthermore, through the mentioned online store, unidentified individuals by the criminal prosecution body, acting as operators of the online store, received orders from drug consumers, who indicated in messages the type of drugs requested, the quantity, and were informed about the price at which

form of traces, which are signs of the application of one or another method. Underestimating traces negatively affects the overall quality of the investigation. Correct forensic evaluation of traces makes it possible to create a real opportunity for the rapid perception from the initial information of the traces for the discovery of the crime. The study of the practice of investigating crimes related to the illegal circulation of drugs has shown that the most common are the following groups of traces, specific to crimes of this type: (1) traces of cultivating plants (raw materials) and manufacturing drugs, (2) traces of transporting, storing, and selling drugs, (3) traces of drug consumption.

The first group includes residues of plant materials in the places of cultivation and storage (stems, leaves, inflorescences, pollen, etc.), any technological materials and waste (used and worn parts of plants, the plants themselves, solvents used), secondary products of the drug manufacturing and purification stage (for example, dark brown substance layers on vessel walls formed during the manufacturing of acetylated opium), finished narcotics, components of narcotic synthesis (anhydride, acetone, household solvents 645, 646, 647, 648, 649, 650, R-5, vinegar, potassium permanganate), recipes (from scientific and non-scientific sources), specialized literature, sketch notes describing drug manufacturing methods (notebooks, sheets, and their remnants), unpleasant odors from the clothes and body of the drug producer, formed as a result of their manufacturing processes (especially true in cases of synthetic drug manufacturing), fingerprints: on tools used in committing crimes (vessels, scales), on drug consumption means (syringes), on packaging adapted for drug storage and sale (glass containers, paper or plastic bags), various micro-traces on these items. Traces of the second group include paper and other packaging (parts and pieces of paper, polyethylene, cigarette and regular foil), special containers, hiding spots in vehicles, in the clothes of carriers and distributors, as well as special "containers" placed in the courier's body (in body orifices, in the stomach, etc.), traces of the actual narcotics on the suspects' hands, in seams, on folds, and in clothing pockets, traces of drug-associated odors, money and other valuables (audio and video equipment, expensive gadgets, precious metal products, weapons, etc.) received for drug manufacturing, storage, or sale, addresses and phone numbers of couriers, traffickers, etc., shortage of drugs containing narcotics during inventory in pharmacies, hospitals, etc.

The above traces can be found in the living and utility rooms of the suspects, in cabins, recreational areas, garages, vehicles, etc. Drug traces can also be found on the clothing in which suspects produce or sell drugs. Traces of the third group include traces of intravenous and subcutaneous injections (in the elbow region, on the hands, in the groin area, in the armpits, etc.). Possible injection sites are clearly visible due to their frequency and the marks from the tourniquet that appear on the arms. Similarly, changes in the external appearance and life of the drug consumer become visible (changes in daily routine, associativity in their behavior, increase or decrease in appetite, isolation, etc.).

The difficulty in detecting and identifying crimes related to the illegal trafficking of drugs and synthetic drugs lies in the fact that these crimes do not have a primary source of information, such as a victim. An exception is the illegal acts of theft or extortion of drugs or synthetic drugs.

In other cases of committing crimes related to the illegal trafficking of drugs and synthetic drugs, the main grounds for initiating criminal proceedings are self-reports by law enforcement

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they could purchase them and the payment method. Regarding the quantity of drugs needed, especially the number of doses requested, the individuals acting as operators of the online store informed B.A. In turn, after receiving the larger packages, B.A. hid the smaller packages of drugs, which were divided into doses according to the orders received from consumers, in various locations in the municipality of Chisinau and passed them on to individuals acting as. As a result of the activities carried out within the online drug sales store, from unidentified individuals who managed the activities of the respective store, during the period from 13.09.2021 to 29.09.2021, B.A. received transfers in the virtual currency \*\*\*\*\*, equivalent to the amount of 1,590 US dollars, which is 28,063.5 Moldovan Lei, according to the average exchange rate established by the National Bank of Moldova, into the electronic wallets indicated to the user of the account "\*\*\*\*\*" through the account "\*\*\*\*\*" (registered on the phone number +373 \*\*\*\*\*), created in the Telegram application on his phone.

agencies regarding evidence indicating the commission of such acts, self-denunciations, and reports by citizens (often anonymous).

The key to detecting and identifying crimes in this category lies in the results of special investigative activities and the patrol services' activities (maintaining public order [10]).

Investigation officers, analyzing the situation obtained as a result of special investigation activities [1, art.132<sup>2</sup>], identify the most frequent hiding places, possible locations for setting up other hiding places, determine individuals possibly involved in drug trafficking, storage locations, and drug manufacturing laboratories. However, it should be noted that currently, it is very difficult to obtain such information due to the modernized structure of criminal networks, where all participants in illegal drug and synthetic drug trafficking communicate with each other through instant messaging software that, in turn, have data encryption tools, and money flows through online payment systems and cryptocurrencies. This significantly complicates the identification of other participants in the criminal network, and upon the apprehension of one, usually a consumer or "small courier," it becomes difficult to obtain further information because the detainee himself does not know the other participants and has never seen them. However, law enforcement agencies are adapting to the modern conditions implemented and used by traffickers. In the initial stage of investigating cases related to the illegal trafficking of drugs and synthetic drugs, the following typical situations are usually highlighted: 1) the apprehension of a person during or immediately after committing a drug-related offense where drugs are seized from them; 2) the person is apprehended with reasonable suspicion of involvement in drug or synthetic drug trafficking offenses, but these substances were not found on them.

For the first situation, the most typical criminal investigation actions and special investigation activities are as follows:

- apprehension and body search of the suspect;
- examination of the location where the apprehension took place, the area where the drug-containing crop is cultivated, the spaces where drugs or raw materials for their production were stored;
- examination of substances, documents, objects, and records;
- forensic examination of the suspect to determine drug intoxication or the body's condition;
- appointment and conduct of chemical expertise;
- appointment and conduct of forensic expertise;
- searches at the suspect's residence, workplace, in their personal vehicle, examination of the contents of the mobile phone (there may be multiple);
- interrogation of the suspect;
- interrogation of witnesses;
- conducting special investigation activities aimed at establishing all criminal connections, storage locations, distribution channels, etc.

The second situation is characterized by:

- medical examination of the suspect to identify drug intoxication or the body's condition;
- search at the suspect's residence, workplace, means of transportation;
- interrogation of the suspect;
- interrogation of witnesses;
- examination of the suspect's objects, documents, clothing;
- ordering of forensic, chemical expertise, etc.;
- conducting special investigation activities aimed at establishing drug trafficking facts, storage locations, accomplices to the crime, etc.

Depending on the specific situation in the initial stage of the investigation, the following specific versions (hypotheses) can be proposed for verification:

- the discovered drugs were purchased by the suspect from an unknown drug dealer;

- the suspect is a regular customer of the drug dealer;
- the suspect is a drug user and manufactures drugs from raw materials obtained, extracted, cultivated by him;
- the suspect detained on reasonable suspicion of committing a crime related to illegal drug trafficking is a member of a criminal group;
- the drugs, designer drugs found on the suspect or used by him are stolen from a medical institution, pharmacy, or another institution by him or someone else.

Furthermore, versions (hypotheses) can be put forward regarding the methods of drug manufacturing, the location of individuals involved in the crime, drug-containing crops, drug storage locations, etc.

When planning criminal prosecution, special attention must be paid to the interaction of various law enforcement agencies. As indicated by law enforcement practice, the discovery and investigation of many such crimes require a complex of criminal prosecution actions combined with various special investigative measures, as these crimes are deeply latent and are not committed through a single action or episode but have a continuous nature until the offenders are apprehended and the illegal acts are stopped.

The illicit trafficking of drugs and designer drugs, as well as the spread of addiction, already have a negative impact on the socio-psychological situation in society, negatively affecting the economy, politics, law, rule of law, and the health of many people. The rate of increase in the number of drug users and psychotropic substance consumers is rising due to modern covert mechanisms for drug distribution. Drug-dependent individuals are becoming increasingly younger. More and more minors are gaining “experience” in drug and designer drug use. In the last decade, the number of latent drug-related crimes has increased many times over. The number of illnesses and deaths due to drug use is also increasing, even among children.

The main causes of the spread of drug addiction would be: the desire of many young people to experience the effects of drugs on themselves, the possibility of procurement through secure clandestine methods, the emergence of new drugs at low prices, often underfunding the activities of law enforcement agencies and special counter-drug trafficking services.

Summarizing the above, we find that drug addiction is not a personal issue for each individual in society. Today, most states create and promote state policies to counter drug addiction in society. Existing regulations contain a large amount of systematized provisions that define tasks, principles, priorities, implementation objectives; however, successful strategy is seen in the interaction of all public bodies and organizations opposing the spread of drug addiction, in improving the prevention system, in strict compliance with procedures for the legal circulation of narcotics, in compliance with legal, administrative, control, and technological requirements regulating the production, storage, transportation, and medical use of drugs containing narcotic substances.

However, along with the social policy pursued by states, it is necessary to improve the fight against illegal drug trafficking by law enforcement agencies. Every day, more and more new ways of committing drug trafficking crimes emerge, new, stronger, and more dangerous drugs appear, and the methods of manufacturing them are perfected. Of particular concern are the so-called “synthetic” drugs of non-plant origin, obtained through chemical reactions (salts, bath salts, “salt” - a term used in the Republic of Moldova). These have a particularly harmful effect on the human body, often causing psychological dependence from the first use [15] and are rapidly spread not only at the city, county, or country level but at a continental and global level<sup>5</sup>[9].

<sup>5</sup> On March 15, 2023, law enforcement authorities dismantled a drug trafficking network and detained a man and his concubine, from whom they seized approximately 1.9 kg of a prohibited substance. According to estimates, on the black market, this quantity of PVP-type drugs, white or pink crystals, known as „salt,” would have been sold by the suspects for around 1.2 million lei. They had been monitored by law enforcement for three months, and on March 3, 2023, they were detained while they were placing the drugs in hiding spots, from where they were supposed to be picked up by customers.

Given that interceptions of electronic communications often do not yield results due to encryption and advanced technologies applied to the creation of messaging software used on the internet, each state is expected to seek measures and ways to penetrate drug trafficking schemes in order to dismantle them and ensure the enforcement of criminal law.

Online sales through stores set up in electronic communication applications, online transfers, and converting money into cryptocurrency, using bank cards with open IBANs in the names of other individuals (elderly or needy who do not objectively perceive the situation) or in banks abroad, using non-bank payment terminals (QIWI, BPAY, OPLATA, etc.), constitute serious obstacles in countering the illegal circulation of drugs and ethnobotanicals. In this regard, there is a need for more in-depth collaboration between law enforcement agencies and financial-banking institutions. The latter could provide law enforcement agencies with information about multiple transfers of small amounts to the same accounts or electronic wallets operated at certain time intervals. This information would allow investigative officers to verify the information and more easily uncover the criminals behind drug sales networks and online stores, both in large and small quantities.

Typically, in most countries, the competence to detect and combat crimes related to the illegal circulation of drugs lies with the police, the criminal investigation bodies of the police. The general objective of these law enforcement agencies is to significantly reduce the supply of illegal drugs on the market by identifying trafficking networks and dismantling them (reducing the demand for drugs would be more within the competence of health protection authorities, the educational system, etc.).

In the traditional approach to measuring the effectiveness of combating drug-related crime, the main emphasis is placed on quantitative data regarding recorded offenses and individuals detained or convicted. In this sense, we consider that the effectiveness of combating crimes in the field of illegal drug and ethnobotanical circulation should be evaluated not only by the number of cases and individuals detained or convicted but also by the qualitative indicators of this activity: detecting drug warehouses, apprehending operators of virtual stores, identifying sources and channels of transportation in large quantities. These measures would reduce the drug supply on the market and lead to a decrease in drug addiction as a social phenomenon.

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